

Nuggets from the Past

By Norman McLeod

Along the Santa Fe Trail

The Santa Fe Trail was the first of the main three roads leading into the vast western expanse of North America, excluding Canada. The Oregon and California Trails were emigrant trails; the Santa Fe was largely commercial.

Before 1821, the settlement of Santa Fe was the northernmost provincial capitol in New Spain, and the few Americans who visited there were exposed to fines and imprisonment. When in 1821 Mexico declared its independence, the restrictions disappeared. American traders in Missouri, the U.S. frontier at the time, were encouraged to haul their sorely-needed goods over the 900-mile trail to Santa Fe.

"It was the longest-lasting of the great trails west, and it saw the most Indian fighting by far," states Gregory Franzwa, a St. Louis historian.

In time, the trail became a two-way commercial road, with trading goods transported in both directions - some years seeing more Hispanic than Anglo traders. The heavy wagons pulled by plodding 12-ox teams sailed the Great Plains like vast ocean armadas, four columns abreast, as many as 100 high-wheeled wagons per train.

Missouri became a state in 1821 when its economy was in a sorry condition. Hard money was as scarce as lizard teeth. Among those in critical shape was William Becknell, a Franklin farmer-speculator. In 1821, his creditors were suing him and he faced a debtor's cell. Desperate, he followed an Indian trail west with a packtrain he'd hurriedly slapped together, containing goods he hoped to sell to trappers and Indians. Along the way, he heard of the Mexican revolt, so he set his course toward Santa Fe. He was the first American trader in this city of 30,000 commodity-poor settlers.

After a five-month absence, Becknell returned home a comparatively rich man. His next jaunt to Santa Fe was with wagons instead of pack animals - laden with hardware and fabrics. Other businessmen recognized the golden opportunity, and the Santa Fe Trail was born. By the 1840s, profits were in the millions.

The trail was not without its hazards - from prairie fires to icy blizzards, from drowning torrents to fatal thirst, from buffalo stampedes to dysentery and cholera. Not to overlook the constant threat from Plains Indians.

Westward trains left Missouri and entered "Indian country." Rolling over the line into what would become Kansas was like entering a foreign country, yet the first miles penetrated the land of the peaceful Osage and Kansa. Once past Council Grove, the wagon trains organized into larger units before entering the territories of the Plains Indians - Kiowa, Comanche, Arapaho, Apache and Cheyenne.

Traders generally headed west in a single annual caravan. The wagon numbers increased from 26 in 1824 to 230 in 1843. The killing of buffalo along the trail expanded yearly. By 1867, Kiowa Chief Satanta complained, "There are no longer any buffalo around here, nor anything else we can kill to live on."

Indian frustration triggered more open battles with the whites. Today, Kansas farms still yield battlefield reminders. One of these farmers, Ralph Hathaway, has never plowed under the most impressive set of ruts on the entire trail, seven swales wide. It was on his land that 200 Indians attacked a train, slaying a mother and her teen-age son.

The original trail followed the Arkansas River into south-eastern Colorado, then cut southwest via the Raton Pass into New Mexico. Later, the lower Cimarron Cutoff was blazed, saving 10 days traveling time. On the original trail, or Mountain Branch, stood old Bent's Fort, today a National Historic Site. Not a military fort, but a trading post, it was astutely managed by the two Bent brothers and a Frenchman, Ceran St. Vrain.

Today, the restored old fort stands near La Junta, Co., its past a story in itself.

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The huge adobe walls offered security and shelter to the weary teamsters. The three partners traded peacefully with the Indians until the Mexican War - 1846-48 - when the U.S. Army took over the fort as a military base. It was never the same after that. In 1849, its sole remaining owner, William Bent, abandoned it and reportedly set it afire.

We visited the fort in 1990 - walking through its walls and interior rooms, seeing the billiard room where Kit Carson may have played pool, along with the bedrooms where traders' wives infrequently slept. I felt like I was walking on the footsteps of history.

In 1992, my wife and I attended a week-long senior citizen Elderhostel in Trinidad, Co. One of the three classes we enrolled in was a study of the Santa Fe Trail. The small city of Trinidad - very Spanish in its influence - stood directly on the old trail. In fact, its main street today was once a part of it.

In our exploration of the downtown area, we came across two appealing old two-story mansions - side by side - the Baca and Bloom Houses. The Baca is an adobe home purchased in 1870 by Don Felipe Baca, the Rockefeller of his era. He acquired great wealth through shrewd farming and cattle raising, and donated much of his riches for civic uses. Next door, the Bloom House was a banker-cattleman's fine mansion, built in 1882. Both are open to the public - offering splendid insights into the past century.

A highlight of our Elderhostel class was a 100-mile bus ride into New Mexico via the famous Raton Pass. Our destination was Las Vegas (The Meadows) - established in 1836 by early Spanish settlers. It developed into a town dubbed "The Wildest of the Wild West," that one writer described thusly: "It was so wild and full of bloody bullet holes and neck-stretched hemp as to make Tombstone and Dodge City look like headquarters for a Billy Graham crusade."

Our bus parked in the town plaza, and we ate lunch in the historic old Plaza Hotel - erected in 1885.

One of our other stops was old Fort Union, also on the Santa Fe Trail. It is now in ruins, but at one time was the largest military fort in the Southwest, a staging and supply point for other western forts. Place two football fields side by side, and you have an idea of its size.

Here we now stood on four parallel ruts from the old trail, running north to south adjacent to the fort. It was a peculiar thrill for me - imagining the noisy rolling of the heavy wagons, the shouts of the teamsters to the posted sentries and the mountains of dust provoked by the spoked wagon wheels.

First the Santa Fe Railroad and then the automobile provided the killing blows to the old trail. But, it's memory lingers on.